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‘Scotland and Russia: Cultural Perception Since 1900’ Symposium Report

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The second symposium of the ‘Scotland and Russia: Cultural Encounters Since 1900’ project, entitled ‘Scotland and Russia: Cultural Perception Since 1900’ took place at the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, on 10-11 April 2015.¹ The opening keynote talk began with an analysis of Russian interpretations of the 2014 Scottish Referendum; the following presentations moved backwards through the twentieth century, ending with Aberdeen in 1914 and touching along the way on travel writing, poetry, art, cultural organisations, war correspondence, diplomacy and radical politics, in all of which arenas the modern Scottish view of Russia was forged.

The concluding paper of the symposium was also its chronological starting point. Dr. Billy Kenefick analysed the impact of the Russian revolution on a part of Scotland usually omitted from the familiar narrative about ‘Red Clydeside’. At the time of the Great War, Glasgow was considered by most to be the city with the potential to ignite a Soviet-style revolution in Scotland. However, William Leslie, a delegate to the Comintern Congress in Moscow, returned to the northeast of Scotland in 1920 in the firm belief that, relative to the size of the population, ‘Aberdeen was more red than Glasgow’. Before 1914 no-one would have considered Aberdeen a leading regional centre of radical proletarian politics, and Dr. Kenefick explained this transformation by placing the views and career of William Leslie in the context of the wider social and political impact of the Russian revolution.

Another Scot who found himself caught up in Russian revolutionary politics was R. H. Bruce Lockhart, the subject of Dr. Murray Frame’s paper. Lockhart famously recorded his perceptions of Russia in *Memoirs of a British Agent* (1932), but Dr. Frame revealed the extent to which his Scottish childhood influenced his writing about events that were to become the stuff of many a spy thriller. *My Scottish Youth* (1937) thus provides the key to analysing one of the seminal accounts of British involvement in the Russian revolution.

Scots figured on the Russian scene at this time not just as agents and activists, but also as soldiers. The war correspondent and photographer Robert Scotland Liddell’s name may be as obscure now as Lockhart’s is recognisable, but many British readers of the periodical press

¹ Further details and podcasts of the talks are available on the project website: www.englit.ed.ac.uk/scotland-and-russia

during the Great War learnt of the latest developments on the Eastern Front directly from his pen and camera. Prof. Anthony Cross's paper analysed the elusive figure of this Scottish Russian army officer and author of three books about Russia.

Prof. Michael Hughes spoke about another Scottish-born correspondent who covered the war from a Russian point of view. Stephen Graham was a travel writer and one of the best-known British 'experts' on the country, before his search for 'Holy Russia' was cut short by the revolution. Throughout his long life, Graham fitfully played with the idea of himself as a 'Scotsman', and Hughes examined whether his interest in 'Holy Russia' and in questions of national identity more broadly was shaped by his failure to make himself 'at home' in the world he inhabited.

Surprisingly, Graham shared many of the same Russian intellectual influences as his younger contemporary, the modernist poet Hugh MacDiarmid. Prof. Patrick Crotty's paper argued that MacDiarmid's interest in Russian literature and religious philosophy long predated his espousal of Soviet communism, and that he read the politics through the literature rather than – as is customarily assumed – the literature through the politics. MacDiarmid's poetry balanced Russian and Scottish intertexts, engaging with authors as diverse as Solovyev, Tyutchev, Dostoevsky, Bely and Blok, and constructing Scottishness in relation to the 'idea' of Russia.

Turning from the world of literature to the world of art, one finds that the most prominent figure to bring Russian culture into Scotland was not Scottish at all. Dr. Oksana Morgunova's paper discussed the life of Elena Tamara Talbot-Rice (née Abelson), a Russian émigré, archaeologist and scholar of Byzantine and Russian art. Much of her time from 1934 onwards was spent in Edinburgh, where her husband was professor of Fine Art at the University, and where, in 1958, she co-organised the first British exhibition on Byzantine art.

It was also in the 1950s that Lt. Cdr. Dairmid Gunn became professionally interested in Russia, and in his talk he vividly recounted his own experiences as a witness to sixty-five years of history. Gunn took his audience through the tense early years of the Cold War: from his language studies under a descendant of Sologub, to his time living in the Russian émigré community in Paris in the 1950s, to service as a naval attaché in the British Embassy in Moscow in the 1960s. In subsequent decades he was closely involved with the GB-USSR Association and the Scotland Russia Forum, and he shared many fascinating details of cultural 'bridge-building' with the highest levels of the Soviet bureaucracy in the 1980s.

Lt. Cdr. Gunn's paper brought the story up to the present day, which was the subject of Prof. Andrei Rogatchevski's keynote on Russian views of the 2014 Scottish Referendum.

Prof. Rogatchevski showed how the contemporary Scottish discourse on independence is being pressed into the service of Russian political and nationalist narratives, and how Scotland was the prism through which Russian concerns about western sanctions, Crimea, the Ukraine conflict and election fraud were viewed in 2014. Just as a century ago Russian journalists such as Korney Chukovsky co-opted Scotland for political propaganda purposes, so today the Russian media continues to find the idea of Scotland (and its historic connections with Russia) extremely useful. As the other papers presented at the symposium demonstrated, however, the same may be said for Scottish constructions of Russia over the last hundred years, all the way up to Alex Salmond's remarks on Putin in the run-up to the Referendum. The process of cultural engagement and co-optation is always a two-way street.